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ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

A SERMON


...BY...

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

THE SECRET OF HIS LIFE.

“In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths.”—*Proverbs iii: 6.*

“Abraham Lincoln,” writes Morse, “stands apart in striking solitude—an enigma to all men.” Hardly more than a generation has passed since his great work was accomplished, and yet he has been the subject of more varied discussion than any other historical character save, perhaps, Napoleon. But when the eager public asks of each new biographer, “Have you solved the mystery of this strange and lonely life?” “Can you explain the man?” the answer is always in the negative. Many contributions have been made to this absorbing study by speaker and author, but complete success has never been achieved and never will be. It is, therefore, with much humility and with no expectation of doing what other men more distinguished than myself have failed to do that I speak of “The Secret of Abraham Lincoln’s Life.” It is because I recognize the greatness of this unique career, because I think it contains inexhaustible lessons for patriots, noble example and effective motive for the young and courage and consolation for the old, that I have established the Sunday nearest his birthday as a perpetual saints day in the calendar of our Church when

we consider some phase of the life of the great Emancipator.

Consider for a moment the problem presented by the life and work of Lincoln. When he became President of the United States the nation was approaching the climax of the "irrepressible conflict." The prophecy of Washington and Jefferson that a free republic and slavery could not long exist was fulfilled. Agitation had done its work. Public opinion was stirred. Avarice and sectionalism were in the ascendancy. The ship of state was laboring in heavy seas and rapidly drifting upon the rocks. The North was aroused. The South was on the verge of secession, and the "border States" hesitating in sympathy and action. Mutterings of coming war were in the air. Assassins were lying in wait for the newly elected magistrate. A great social and political upheaval was at hand.

Upon arriving at the seat of government Lincoln found the treasury empty, the national credit gone. The nucleus of an army and navy which had been in existence for some time was scattered and disarmed. The party which elected him was in the minority. The Democrats who had been in power for half a century were hostile. There were large numbers in the North in sympathy with the malcontents. He was the candidate of the minority of his own party. At the time of his nomination in Chicago, in May, 1860, Seward seemed to be the logical and available candidate of the Republicans. Only two States were a unit for Mr. Lincoln's nomination.* There were therefore disappointment and discord in the President's own party. In a word, he was an "object of unfavorable prejudice with the majority of the people, and of contempt with the minority." A promi-

*Letter of Munroe Crane to "New York Sun," February 12, 1898.

nent New York paper gave expression to the prevailing opinion when it announced: "The Republican Convention at Chicago have nominated Abraham Lincoln, of Illinois, for President of the United States, a third-rate Western lawyer, poorer even than poor Pierce. The conduct of the Republican party in this nomination is a remarkable indication of small intellect growing smaller. They pass over Seward, Chase and Banks, who are statesmen and able men, and they take up a fourth-rate lecturer who cannot speak good grammar and who, to raise the wind, delivers his hackneyed, illiterate compositions at \$200 apiece. At such a nomination the Democrats have good reason to rejoice. They have a clear road now before them, and nothing can arrest their onward march to victory, if they are only true to themselves."

The Great Powers of Europe were without sympathy. Their conduct was marked by cold neutrality or secret hostility. The London *Times* expressed the hope and belief of the ruling classes of Great Britain and France: "The great republic is no more. The bubble is burst." When Abraham Lincoln entered the White House he was believed in completely almost by none. He was freely called an "ape," a "satyr," a "stupid blockhead." During the first days of defeat in the civil war his friends held themselves aloof. He was unsupported or conspired against by his Cabinet. He was caricatured in London and Paris and maligned at home, until on one occasion, after reading a most violent and scurrilous attack upon his character and motives by a distinguished American, he said, "Abraham Lincoln, are you a man or a dog?"

What had he accomplished when a little over four years later the tributes of individuals and nations to his worth and work made a quarto volume of one thousand pages? Windsor Castle and the cottage of the English peasant, the House of Parliament and Westminster Abbey

vied with one another in expressions of esteem and sorrow. King and commoner, aristocrat and democrat round all the world united in recognition of his peculiar greatness and his inestimable service. Fighting against tremendous odds he had come off victorious. He had saved the Union. He had freed the slaves. He had made the great republic of the present possible. He had secured the crown of liberty upon the head of humanity. He had given his life as a sacrifice upon the altar of his country. It is not the sentiment of pity common to the human heart, but the mature judgment of the wisest and most discriminating that has exalted him to the position of one of the greatest and noblest of the sons of men. The words of Raymond, his intimate friend and co-laborer, written soon after Lincoln's death, have more weight to-day as expressing the deliberate verdict of the world than when they were first printed in 1865. "Mr. Lincoln's place in the history of this country will be fixed quite as much by the importance of the events amidst which he moved and the magnitude of the results which he achieved as by his personal characteristics. Politically, the chief magistrate, whose administration quelled a rebellion of a million of people, set free four million and vindicated the ability of the people to maintain under all contingencies the government which rests on their will, whose wisdom and unspotted character secured his re-election, and who finally, when his work was done, found his reward in the martyrdom, which came to round out his life and set the final seal upon his renown will fill a place hitherto unoccupied in the annals of the world."

What was the preparation of Lincoln for so remarkable a career? He had inherited from his ancestors, men of tough fibre and great courage, most of them frontiersmen living far from the refinements of the city, a strong body

and sturdy common sense. His own characterization of his early life was "the short and simple annals of the poor." He belonged to the working class. He was surrounded by misery and violence. When but seven years of age he was set at work with the axe to clear up a farm in a Western forest. Until seventeen years old he was a simple farm laborer. Six months comprised his entire schooling. He was a "hired hand" on a flat-boat, captain in the Indian War, storekeeper, postmaster, surveyor, self-educated lawyer and politician. He had no library, no academy, no college. He was without the aid of wealth and association with superior men.

Our experience in America has shown that there are certain advantages in such an origin and training. The "self-made man," when he "does not worship his maker," is one of the best results of the growth of democracy. But the peculiar ability and gifts required by Lincoln during his trying administration are not those which the manner of his early years would be likely to develop. The difficulty of originating and directing extraordinary political measures, the delicacy of negotiation and the power to control complicated and disordered national machinery demanded not only breadth of view, but judgment, prudence and patience such as can hardly be expected from such a preparation as Lincoln's.

Compare Lincoln and Douglas. How striking the contrast! Douglas was "a brilliant impersonation of all the more worldly forces of human nature." He had a splendid physique, a voice of extraordinary power and melody. He had the advantages of education, riches and association with the great. His oratory was splendid; he was magnetic, capable of capturing all classes by the suppleness of his thought and the grace of his bearing. Well was he called the "Little Giant!" Lincoln was gaunt and tall, homely in face, awkward in bearing,

without the aid of the wealthy and the powerful. One had world-wide renown, the other was at best but the standard bearer of an unpopular party in a half populated State. Lincoln, in 1856, well described the differences between himself and his antagonist: "Twenty-two years ago Judge Douglas and I first became acquainted; we were both young men, he a trifle younger than I. Even then we were both ambitious; I quite as much as he. With me the race of ambition has been a flat failure. With him it has been one of splendid success. His name fills the nation, and it is not unknown in foreign lands. The politicians of his party have for years past looked upon him as certain to be the President of the United States. They have seen in his round, jolly, fruitful face post offices, land offices, marshalships and cabinet appointments, chargeships and foreign missions bursting and sprouting out in wonderful exuberance, ready to be laid hold of by their greedy hands. On the contrary, no one has ever expected me to be President. In my poor, lean, lank face nobody has ever seen that any cabbages were sprouting out. I wish it to be distinctly understood and borne in mind that we have to fight this battle without many—perhaps without any—of the external aids which are brought to bear against us." And yet temporary defeat ended in glorious success. The brilliant, well educated and renowned Douglas went down to his grave worn out with disappointed ambition, while his almost unknown antagonist, "the third-rate lawyer" from Illinois, was twice elected President of the United States and accomplished a work as great as man's hands ever achieved.

Is not the problem presented by Abraham Lincoln's character and career a difficult one? Viewed from a purely human standpoint, the effect seems out of proportion to the cause. Execution beggars preparation. We

may not be able to uncover completely the secret of this remarkable life, but I think we have discovered the chief source of its inspiration and power. The controlling principle and impulse were not intellectual, social or political, but religious. Faith in God and in the supremacy of right and the belief that he was set apart and consecrated to a peculiar work by the Almighty was the secret of Abraham Lincoln's life. I believe Lincoln was right in his thought. God selects, endows and devotes men to special missions. The secret of a truly great life is hid in God. A true hero, emancipator, savior of the world is in some sense God in manifestation. To find out such a man to perfection is as impossible as it is to "search out the secret places of the most high." Men are God's instruments; in their bodies and brains he performs great deeds. While we recognize free will within limits, we believe that men may be laid hold of the spirit of justice, right and love, but names for God, and fused in the divine flame he moulded into creators of States, defenders of liberty, protectors and inspirers of humanity. Moses believed this in relation to his work. He had "seen God face to face." He was ordained to lead the children of Israel out of bondage into the promised land. Cromwell "cried to God in his straits, in his extreme need not to forsake the cause that was His." Washington was solemnized by his sense of obligation to Deity, "Who," he believed, "presided in the council of nations and whose providential aid can supply every human defect." "No people," he says, "can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States." So Abraham Lincoln felt. Arnold, his intimate friend and biographer, writes: "There is no doubt that he had a deep, profound conviction, a superstition, a presentment, call it what you will—a belief

that he was set apart for a great purpose, and that he was an instrument in the hands of God for the work he had to do. Hence his faith that right makes right. Believing this, he did his duty as God enabled him to see it, and he never in the darkest hour despaired."

The nature of Lincoln was profoundly religious. There have been those who have denied that he was a Christian. If the measure of his faith be sought in religious conversation, in prayer meetings and revivals, in the acceptance of some prescribed creed and ecclesiastical associations, then Lincoln was not a good Christian. But if dependence upon God, faith in the divine government, in immortality and the ultimate triumph of truth and right in the world be the test, the great President was a Christian. If religion be the honest and firm performance of duty in the face of every difficulty and at great personal cost under the sense of the constant pressure of God, Lincoln reached its highest expression. Declarations of his trust in God and his belief in the efficacy of prayer fill his state papers, letters and speeches. He was not "orthodox;" he cared little for dogmas; he was not a member of any outward Church. But as some one has said: "Probably no ruler ever made a more profoundly and peculiarly Christian impression on the mind of the world than Lincoln." Says another writer: "Two prominent and leading ideas were in his mind from the beginning to the end, man's helplessness both as to strength and wisdom, and God's helpfulness in both." His whole career was marked by the same absolute reliance upon God and the most persistent performance of duty as he understood it.

In the address delivered at Cooper Institute, in 1860, he exhibited this spirit when he said: "Let us stand by our duty fearlessly and effectively. Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us,

nor frightened by menaces of destruction, nor of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it." Sobered by his election to the Presidency and the sense of the enormous responsibility which had been placed upon his shoulders by the people, he addressed these words to his friends and neighbors when he left Springfield for Washington: "I go to assume a task more difficult than that which has devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington. He never would have succeeded except for the aid of Divine Providence, upon which he at all times relied. I feel that I cannot succeed without the same Divine blessing which sustained him, and on the same Almighty Being I place my reliance for support. And I hope you, my friends, will all pray that I may receive that Divine assistance, without which I cannot succeed, but with which success is certain."

From this time on, as his life came into public notice more and more, it was observed that there were no avowals of the need of Divine aid or requests of sympathy and the help of all good men's prayers too frequent. His sense of weakness and of God's strength continually increased. The call of the Almighty grew louder and clearer. All questions were decided at "the tribunal of the laws of God." In speaking of the emancipation of the slaves he said: "It is a momentous thing to be the instrument under Providence of the liberation of a race." His confidence in the justice of his cause grew until it became a holy passion. And, although for a time all things were against him, he had the prophet's faith that "the Almighty's side would surely win." There was no undue pride shown or sense of self-importance, but on the contrary the greatest humility. "I should be the most presumptuous blockhead upon this footstool if I for

one day thought I could discharge the duties which have come to me since I came into this place without the aid and enlightenment of one who is stronger and wiser than all others."

The preparation for and the announcement of emancipation were the result of deep religious conviction coupled with a high order of statesmanship. After a full and free discussion with a delegation of representative clergy he said: "I am approached with the most opposite opinions and advice and by religious men who are certain they represent the Divine Will. * * * I hope it will not be irreverent to say that if it be probable that God would reveal His will to others on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed He would reveal it directly to me. If I can learn His will I will do it. These, however, are not the days of miracles, and I suppose I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain, physical facts of the case and learn what appears to be wise and right. Do not misunderstand me because I have mentioned these objections. They indicate the difficulties which have thus far prevented my action in some such way as you desire. I have not decided against a proclamation of emancipation, but hold the matter in advisement. The subject is in my mind by day and by night. Whatever shall appear to be God's will, will I do." When the proclamation was issued its concluding paragraph was: "Upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice warranted by the constitution upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God." When at last he reviewed the work to which he had devoted his life, he said: "No human counsel has devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High."

This habit of looking at everything from the religious

standpoint gave Lincoln clearness of vision. The path of right is always surer than that of expediency. Compromises often confuse and mislead. It also gave him decision. Reliance upon God, the faith that we are obeying his command gives force and determination. It led him to have faith in the people in their essential justice and worth, since they were the offspring of God and under his constant providence. This was Lincoln's crowning virtue. How patient he was! He bided the time of God. With rare self-control he waited, saving the border States to the Union, and avoiding war until the overt act of the rebels placed the government in the attitude of defence, and not assault. He waited until the hour had struck, though reformer assailed him, politician reviled him, friends deserted him, and all the world hissed their contempt; waited, though the sorrow in "the most sorrowful eyes ever seen" grew greater still and the furrows in the homely face became deeper; waited until God called, and then fighting with Him his victory was sure.

When at last Lee surrendered with no spirit of pride or evil exultation, he kneels with his Cabinet in humble thanksgiving, while the tears course down his face.

Abraham Lincoln, when he made his entrance into Richmond, reached the climax of his life. He had begun his battle as a humble lawyer from Illinois; he was a man without prestige of person or manners or education. He had espoused what the world called the losing side. In the days of his rivalry with the eloquent and brilliant Douglas he gave utterance to a noble sentiment which should be written in letters of fire in the chamber of every young man. Speaking of the Presidency, toward which his ambition moved him, he said: "So reached as that the oppressed of my species might have shared with me in the elevation, I would rather stand on that emi-

nence than wear the richest crown that ever pressed a monarch's brow." Surrounded by those whom he had liberated, the air vocal with hallelujahs, he could look back to the days when he had said that, as compared with that of the distinguished Judge and Senator, "his life was a flat failure." Now Douglas lies dead, his power gone. And Abraham Lincoln, twice elected President, stands the observed of all the world in a triumph that has no like in history. Once again the truth of the ancient saying is verified. "One with God is always a majority." The way of God is the way of light, though it may end in martyrdom."

I would recall the scene of Lincoln's second inaugural. Mr. Lincoln is standing in the eastern portico of the Capitol, surrounded by a vast crowd of people. Here are the Judges of the Supreme Court in their official robes, the diplomatic corps in the gorgeous costumes of the nations they represent, distinguished officers of the army and navy in uniform, private citizens, scholars, statesmen, governors, editors and clergymen from all parts of the Union. And most significant and pathetic of all, long lines of invalid and wounded soldiers in the national blue were to be seen, some on crutches, some with empty sleeves, all bearing in form and face the scars of awful conflict.* Four years before he, who is now lauded as "the Savior of his country," had stood in the self same place and "earnestly pleaded" with his "dissatisfied fellow countrymen" for peace. He had soberly told them that the issue of civil war was not in his hands, but their's. There was to be no conflict unless they were the aggressors. But they compelled him to accept war. Four long years of weary, desolating war had passed. Those who had opened hostilities had been overthrown, the institution of slavery was destroyed, peace was dawn-

*See Arnold's description.

ing. The oath of office was administered, and in a clear, sad voice President Lincoln gave utterance to the words of a document which has been declared to be by an English authority "the greatest political document known to history." It breathes the spirit of the loftiest Christian statesmanship. Let us listen to the message of martyred and exalted President:

"Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces. But let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayer of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes. Woe unto the world because of offences, for it must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of these offences, which in the providence of God must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern there any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God so wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still must it be said, that the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us

finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphans, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Abraham Lincoln, we hear and will obey!